

HALDANE FINE ART

THE PICTURE

Tomaso Pombioli, called il Conciabbracci (Crema, 1579 - after 1636)

Portrait of a Young Tennis Player

Full length, standing in an interior, wearing a striped doublet and yellow shorts, Holding a battoir and a ball

Oil on canvas

115.5 by 71 cm., 45 ½ by 28 in.

This remarkable portrait of a real tennis player is very rare. It was probably painted *circa* 1600-1610 when the game of Real or Royal Tennis was at its height. Real Tennis was played throughout the courts of Western Europe, including by King Henry VIII in England and by Francis I, Henri II, Charles IX, and Henri IV in France where, in 1598, the Papal legate recorded over 250 courts in use.

The game was equally popular in Italy and it was at the University of Parma in 1555 that Antonio Scaino de Salo published a book, *Trattato del Giuoco della Palla*, dedicated to his patron, Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara. His lengthy analysis of 'il giuoco della corda' ('the game of the net') describes various methods of play including the use of racquets, as opposed to open hands, for larger courts.

The young player engages with the viewer and holds the ball aloft. The ball has the quartered stitching which is common to Real Tennis balls of the 16th-century¹ and the manner in which the boy holds the ball suggests that he is about to serve. The boy holds a battoir which succeeded the use of the glove towards the end of the 15th century and which was eventually succeeded by the use of a strung racquets².

We are grateful to Professor Marco Tanzi for his attribution to Tomaso Pombioli³, a painter from Lombardy during the second half of the 16th century. Pombioli was a pupil of Gervasio Gatti, with whose style the present work is very close⁴. Fully attributed works are rare but the present work shares very close stylistic traits with Pombioli's *Adoration* in the *Instituti di Ricovero* in Crema. The present work shares close compositional features with an earlier picture, c.1555, of another tennis playing boy, painted by Bernardino Gatti, called *il Sojaro*.

¹ See Simon Inglis, *A Load of Old Balls*, 2005, p.18 and Gianni Clerici, *Tennis*, 1976, illustrated p.41.

² According to Francois Alexandre Pierre de Garsault's treatise, *Art du paumier-racquetier et de la paume*, published in 1767, the use of battoirs continued until the 18th century.

³ A full article by Professor Tanzi is available in Italian, on request.

⁴ See Gervasio Gatti, called *Il Sojaro*, *Three Children Playing Tric Trac*, c. 1590-1610 (Borromeo Collection, Isola Bella)

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Given that Bernardino Gatti was the more famous uncle of Gervasio Gatti, it seems likely that the image of a tennis playing boy in an interior was a favourite image in the studio and may have been used a number of times.

Such early pictures of tennis players are exceptionally rare and the present work exemplifies the imagination of artistic production during the late Renaissance and Mannerist periods.